



Nigerian University Quality: Why the Hero Fails



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Abstract

This paper was designed to take an in-depth look into the establishment and practices of university education in Nigeria from 1960 to 2015, to investigate the reality of what caused Nigerian university education to gradually decline. The paper takes a critical realist approach to review the relevant literature in the field, and forming a base from which to answer the question of ‘why the hero fails’. Three major questions are raised, but not answered, in this paper, as three other papers focus solely on answering these questions. They are; where have things gone wrong? Where are things going wrong? and where may things continue to go wrong? This paper is particular about identifying areas where things are happening within the university sector. The findings reveal that not only is the quality of education declining, but human thinking on tasks, involvement/pro-activeness, and funding are also declining, a major reason why Nigerians ignorantly give way to corrupt practices, which slip in like wolves and continue to evolve the system. The paper concludes that the best approach to the wider picture of what is going on within the university sector is to understand and provide answers to, the three major questions above, in detail. In order to overcome the problems caused, leading to the need to carry out this study, rebuilding is needed using a systematic approach to eradicating waste.

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1. Introduction

Being a hero is very good, and everyone tends to crave the best possible services, irrespective of cost. In a like manner, university education has been supported to deliver services as well as possible, from well-taught programs to on-time delivery, as well as directly meeting the needs of the community through the provision of excellent graduates that can compete anywhere in the world. The Nigerian government took pride in this great achievement, as they were the sole owners of all public universities in the country until 1998 (NUC, 2010). At the time (1960 to 1998) university education in Nigeria was competing directly with that of the United Kingdom because the

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University of London monitored and cross-examined the exams and delivery processes of the majority of universities in Nigeria. As a result of this process, Nigerian university education was among the best in the world, particularly in Africa, between the 1960s and 90s. However, recently, from the year 2000, various authors, such as [Obasi, Akuchie & Obasi \(2010\)](#) and [Duze \(2010\)](#) challenged the Nigerian government's university education by their observation of falling quality, as a result of many challenging issues the universities were facing such as poor facilities, poor findings, library and technological material obsolescence, and other major issues. For example, universities were graduating first class graduates in engineering, while the country still suffered poor roads, universities were graduating first-class law graduates while injustice prevailed, or universities were graduating first class sciences and engineering graduates while the country still imported all machinery, including simple tools like pencils ([Adetunji, 2014](#)). The NUC agreed with this assertion in 2011 after a lot of defense and protecting the image of the universities in Nigeria. They finally released a NUC monthly bulletin ([NUC, 2011](#)) stating that the quality of university education was gradually declining. They called on stakeholders to respond quickly to the needs of university education. In an attempt to take quick action in response to problems, the NUC called on the government for support to resuscitate the institutions. The federal government responded, during President Goodluck's administration, in a stakeholder meeting in 2012 by calling on general stakeholders to rally around the institutions in an attempt to avoid further decline ([NUC, 2012](#)). There is nothing wrong with failure, but it is bad if you do not see that you failed. It is even worse if you agree you have failed and then fail to take corrective measures to address the failure or refuse to work on the areas where you have failed. The author believes that there are always lessons to learn during and after failure, only if you agree that you have failed. This is an approach which researchers can use to make informed decisions on processes within an organization. Certainly, it can be very difficult to agree outright that a system has failed, but from the way in which the system operated before, compared to now, assertions can be made. Therefore, this paper intends to fill the gap in knowledge by studying the reality of Nigerian universities from their glory days when university education used to operate at its best in Africa, an approach which has not been considered in past literature.

This approach to revealing the reality of an event is specifically known as critical realism philosophy ([Adetunji, 2014](#)). Adetunji was of the view that when researchers are in search of reality and trying to create permanent solutions to problems, there is a need to first unpack the issues that led to or made the mechanisms function in a particular way, causing the decline, as in the case of Nigerian universities. Edward et al. (2014) are of the view that the critical realism approach to study asks: what is the main concern? What are the historical events that occur within the structure, causing action or reaction, for event-oriented mechanisms to function in a particular way which makes an event occur? To study these problems, a few aspects must be present. Firstly, there must be an organization/institution that is the structure. Secondly, an agent must be present, which is the employees. Thirdly, there must be mechanisms driving the system, whether they are structured or non-structured. Mechanisms must be present for agents to drive the structure, mechanisms in the form of teaching, learning and research as well as community development. Agents, in the form of various stakeholders who influence decisions about the university (such as NUC management, lecturers, the government, parents, and students) must be involved. The list is endless, depending on which area of the sector you are interested in investigating. However, concentrating on the subject matter, that is the quality of university education in Nigeria, requires the time and resources to unpack what caused the hero to fail. This paper starts by exploring the historical literature of Nigerian universities from the 1970s that hailed them as a 'hero' in Africa. It traces the story to the present day when several authors ([Duze, 2010](#); [Obasi, Akuchie & Obasi, 2010](#); [Ahmed, 2015](#); [Adetunji, 2016](#)) agree that quality is declining.

Arguments have been put forward by [Ibukun \(1997\)](#), that there were no signs of problems in the sector until the government expanded the number of states from 12 to 25 due to increases in population, but failed to provide universities for the states created, until there was a continuous pile-up, which led to overcrowding. Suddenly, access to university education became a major problem in Nigeria. The government failed to follow the population of children who would be leaving compulsory education in 5 to 10 years or to make provision for them. Likewise, the problem of access was compounded by academic staff demanding salary increments, technical tools, books for the library etc. which resulted in continuous industrial strike action. Within this period, a lot of candidates who graduated from compulsory education were waiting to gain admission into the university, while the university failed to graduate the students they had admitted at the time and who should have completed their studies. The continuous shortage of time caused a lot of academics to rush their teaching in order to cover the syllabus when school resumed. This approach led to confusion for staff and students, and a lack of continuity in the students' learning. No wonder [Adetunji \(2015\)](#) defines quality education as a continuous learning process that equips students for the task ahead;

that is, education revolves around students' situations, gives students the ability to be independent in thinking and relate with the community without delay.

2. Materials and Methods

This article is presented based on qualitative analysis. The data were obtained through observation and interviews. The observations were conducted in a non-participant manner and interviews were conducted in deep interview. The informants were determined purposively and snow ball. Data processing was done in three stages included data reduction, data presentation, and data verification/conclusion.

3. Results and Discussions

3.1 Antiquity of Nigerian universities

University education started in Nigeria at the bequest of government demand for human capital to work in the ministries, way back in the 1960s when the country was given independence (Fafunwa, 2005). The intention was good. As a result, the government made education in the country a free service, with the government taking 100% responsibility for the sector just like any other sector within its ministry. This involvement was a capital project for the Nigerian government from 1960 until 2000. From 1960 to 1990, 5 out of 10 graduates from universities of any type in Nigeria got jobs either within the government or private sector. This was because the population of the country was such that it required a large number of employees to manage it from federal to local level. The Nigerian government, since independence, operates at 3 tiers, federal, state and local. This was agreed in order to reach minorities at the grassroots level with the social structures that the government can provide, thereby making university education relevant to students, the government and the community. It is no wonder then, that up until the late 90s any university graduate in Nigeria could easily get a government job, which made white-collar jobs very popular. Nigeria as an independent country started with 12 states across four regions. At the time the major work in the country was farming and trading. Before independence in 1960, the country's colonial masters established a few university colleges in the country affiliated to the University of London. Suddenly, after independence, the country's population grew rapidly from 45.2 million in 1960 to 75 million in 1980, 124 million in the year 2000 and 178.5 million in 2014. These also arose a demand for more graduates to manage every sector of the government. Therefore, a committee was formed to look into the future needs of university education in Nigeria in 1976. The committee traveled around Africa during the period, but at the point of the report, the committee was divided. Some were of the view that more university education should be established, while others were of the view that Nigeria's universities should continue to be managed by the University of London. The report caused a lot of confusion within the elites of the country at the time, but the government used its discretion, based on political zones, to create six universities managed independently by the Nigerian government. However, discussing the history of Nigerian education, outside of how it has been financed, means the paper is leaving critical issues unattended.

Research shows that the allocation of funds to education in the country was average, from 1960 to 1980. But surprisingly, since the oil crisis in the eighties, the proportion of the capital budget allocated to education has been consistently lower than the proportion of recurrent expenditure. Over the years, government capital expenditure allocated to education, as a percentage of the total capital budget, ranged from as low as 1.71% in 1999, and not above 10% in all cases to date. Like the total budget, the proportion was also not consistent. To be candid, education allocation dropped from 9.88% of the total budget in 1986 to 3.3% in 1999. A close look at the distribution shows that the pattern of government budgetary allocation to education as a percentage of the total budget was not consistent. Instead of maintaining an increasing proportion of the yearly budget, it dropped. This drop can be traced back to the introduction of the Structural Adjustment Programmed (SAP) in 1986. Employees within the sector had to embark on countless strikes in the quest for the government to increase the allocation of funds for education. But, regardless of negotiation and incessant strikes to stimulate the government to increase the proportion, it has remained below 8% (apart from 1994 and 2002, where it was slightly above 9%). It has since increased to 9.3% in 2005 and fallen to 8.7% in 2013, but the government continues to create more universities. The number of universities has grown from less than 100 in 2010 to 139 in 2015 (NUC, 2015).

Federal government expenditure on education is below 10% of its overall expenditure. Overall, the proportion has varied between 9.9% and 7.6%, and the trend has been largely downwards compared to the incremental increase in the number of universities. This downward proportion of funds allocated to education gives us cause to question the type of education that is delivered in Nigeria compared to the education expected, which is on time, by competent staff, with up to date resources, in order to transform the minds of students into sound graduates.

3.2 Reasons for the fallen heroes

In the early years of Nigeria, it was obvious that the university was regarded as the single most important industry for the production of high-level manpower, and the capstone of the entire educational system. University training, according to Ume (1979), aims to raise the intellectual tone of society, cultivate the public mind, purify the national taste, supply the principles of popular aspirations and give enlargement and sobriety to ideas of the age. It is not surprising then that stakeholders in the university sector tend to jealously guard the integrity of the university and the quality of graduates produced. It is on record that Nigerian universities have produced high-quality graduates in the past. As affirmed by Daisi (1997), many graduates from the nation's universities distinguished themselves in their areas of specialization, so much so that some of them are now professors in the best universities across the globe. This attestation is quite resounding in that quality entrants were developed into quality graduates. Due to the declining quality in recent years, however, the accolade attached to Nigerian universities seems to have faded away. This can be seen by the flood of criticism that beclouds the admission procedures and quality of graduates produced. In a keynote address delivered at the first education summit of Oyo State held in Ibadan, Okebukola (2006) decried the quality of graduates produced in Nigerian universities, especially in the last four years and thumbed down the quality of those that would graduate in the next three years. Similarly, Adebayo (2007) commented that the non-inclusion of any of the nation's universities in the world best 5,000 universities is unsatisfactory, and worse still, Nigeria ranked number 44, after Ghana, Kenya, and South Africa, in the ranking of African universities. No Nigerian university appeared among the first 5,000 universities in the world.

Previous studies in this area (Nwokocha, 1997; Ige, 1997; Jemibewon, 1997) point out that many entrants into Nigerian universities are deficient in academic quality. Indeed, Nwokocha (1997) called the attention of stakeholders in university education in Nigeria to the purported letter written by the British Council, alerting British universities, in general terms that Nigerian degrees were no longer comparable to honors in the United Kingdom no matter which university awarded the degree or in what discipline. Another report by Ige (1997) revealed how he stumbled on the examination scripts of some undergraduates in one of the nation's universities, and described the performance of such undergraduates as 'deplorable'. However, the assertion put forward by Age is biased, as it is very unfair to generalize based on what happened in one university out of about 101 universities at that time.

In another development, the NUC (2004) assessment study on labor market expectations of graduates from Nigerian universities, revealed that there were scores of unemployed graduates roaming the streets and, more embarrassingly, those who were lucky enough to secure employment had to undergo remedial training in order to bridge the huge knowledge and skills gaps left by university training. This tends to negate the tenet of university education, which is essentially an industry established to produce a quality workforce for national development (Adetunji & Ogunleye, 2015). As a result of these challenging issues, Nigeria has unilaterally opened its doors to foreign programmes and the commercial presence of institutions has benefited from such arrangements for a long time. The negative impacts of foreign educational providers are, in some cases; the provision of poor quality programmed; insufficient commitment and monitoring of the delivery by partner institutions; varying quality standards; indifference to, or general ignorance of, national criteria, local needs and policies; issues of comparability of quality of education and faculty staff; and lack of clear information. Cultural differences and issues relating to recognition of qualifications are also present. Other new challenges faced by authorities come with the technology-mediated provision of higher education, and fraudulent qualifications and practices.

Recent developments in the Nigerian university system seem to indicate that all is not well, as illustrated by quality assurance in Nigerian universities. Babalola (2001) reported that Nigerian universities were in crisis. He stressed that there was less money to spend on teaching, research and community services. Libraries were ill-equipped, laboratories lacked essential apparatus, classrooms were dilapidated and office accommodation was a mirage. Many Nigerian universities even lacked lecturers in the right quantity and of proper quality. The scenario appeared worrisome when viewed against the background that Nigeria once served as the hub of university education in the West-African region. This development revolves around many factors, ranging from the collapse of essential

infrastructure to an explosion in student enrolment without a corresponding increase in funding. As a result of these challenges, Nigerian universities cannot meet their expectations, especially in terms of the quality of teaching and research. The lack of adequate funding has clearly impaired the performance and standard of Nigerian universities as the vicious circle of inadequate funds, helplessness, frustration, and recriminations are continually fed in a mutually reinforcing manner (Kayode, 2002).

3.3 Debate on why the hero fell

Many studies (Obasi, Akuchie & Obasi, 2010; Duze, 2011; Okundare, Solaja and Soyewo, 2013; Adetunji, 2016) have looked into the problems with the provision of quality education in Nigeria, with the discussion centering on how to improve quality. Some authors (Omotola, 2004; Okebukola, 2006; Faniran, 2012) who have looked into university operation have identified one problem or another, from 1990 to date, as the factors responsible for the decline. Likewise, this paper also identifies a few problems, although they are not limited to those listed in this paper. The author reviewed 20 papers that focused on Nigerian university problems and found a huge reoccurrence of the following problems as the major reasons why it was assumed that the hero fell.

- a. *Inadequate physical facilities:* The state of physical facilities in many Nigerian universities is revealed by the NUC (2006) report to be in poor shape. The available physical facilities are severely overstretched and ill-maintained. It was observed that personnel who were expected to monitor, use, or request updated versions of equipment, did not use the facilities for continuous research, therefore there was very little or no demand for better facilities for a long period of time. With this development, quality seems not to be guaranteed in such universities. The question to be asked here is: what happens? Why does the sector continue to lack facilities that could encourage learners' participation? A recent study by Adetunji (2015) states that physical facilities are components of quality assurance, which include student accommodation, lecture rooms, libraries, sporting equipment, and other social facilities that could enhance the running of the university. He claims that if these physical facilities are present, it will definitely improve learning and develop students to be of sound mind.

- b. *Underfunding:* One of the greatest challenges that appear to face Nigerian universities is underfunding. Finance is crucial in any organization, so it continues to dominate discussions on the state of university education in Nigeria. However, concerns about funding are not particular to university education, other institutions like polytechnics, and colleges of education, mono technics and compulsory education experience similar challenges. It is clear that the establishment and running of tertiary institutions are capital intensive, and developing human capital at a higher level requires more funding, a major reason why attention is focused on the university. This is not to undermine the importance of other education providers when considering the issues overall.

Running any institution requires significant investment in providing and maintaining a basic level of infrastructure, including facilities, staff salaries, and residential housing. The government, in the past, largely supported universities in Nigeria, but in the present economic downturn, universities have been grossly underfunded, and this has invariably led to the quality being adversely affected.

- c. *Enrolment explosion:* A large number of students waiting to enroll has become a common feature of Nigerian universities. Many facilities on the ground are overstretched after long strikes over staff requesting pay increments. Okebukola (2005) released a list of overcrowded universities in the country in 2005. Olabisi Onabanjo University Ago-Iwoye topped the list, with an excess enrolment of 24,628 students. This development surely has a negative impact on the quality of university services provided by the institution, since excess enrolment usually leads to overcrowded classrooms, ineffective teaching, and examination malpractices. No wonder Ige (1997) claimed that the performance of undergraduates was deplorable, and entrants to Nigerian universities were called deficient in quality. A question to ask here is: can these problems be traced to university management? This question is raised because it is assumed that if management do what they should be doing, they would not allow overcrowding of their carrying capacity.

The enrolment explosion affects the carrying capacity of an institution. The more the carrying capacity is stretched, the more staff work under stress, which is frustrating because the teacher will not be able to discharge their duties effectively. For example, teachers might not even know their students due to large numbers in classes. This makes it difficult for them to correct the system without control over the type of student admitted. The student supply is managed via the admissions office.

- d. *Poor management:* The way some of the Nigerian universities are managed by university administrators has a consequential effect on quality assurance in the universities. For most universities, the management means little more than playing the role of 'caretaker'. This vital function has been largely reduced to the maintenance of the status quo. This unfortunate development negates the concept of a university, particularly in a developing country like Nigeria. It seems certain that, as long as management continues to play this non-involvement role, quality assurance will continue to be jeopardized.
- e. *Inadequate staffing:* One of the reasons for the low level of quality assurance in Nigerian universities is a severe shortage of teaching staff. The report by the NUC (2006) shows that only 16,856 out of 72,704 staff in the federal universities are academic staff, the others being support staff. This has a negative effect on the quality of services delivered by the university by the non-qualified academic staff. It has also resulted in many universities being assumed to be bottom heavy, in terms of academic staff mix. Every university in the country is short of at least 50 to 100 professors in proportion to the number of students admitted and courses offered. Okundare, Solaja, and Soyewo (2013) claim that 3 in 10 professors in Nigerian universities are due for retirement, but keep working above retirement age as there is no one to replace them. This results in a lack of one-to-one time with students, and no student support services to meet the needs of students.

4. Conclusion

This paper was designed to unpack the reality of how Nigerian universities have been operating from 1960 to 2015, to understand the major reasons or causes of the decline that the federal government had to call for stakeholder support on. The first interesting part of this paper is the use of a critical realism approach in the quest to know what actually happened or what caused an event to occur, rather than following a traditional approach of studying the problem without knowing where the problem came from or what caused it. The second aspect of the paper is an attempt to close the gap in knowledge. Problems do not just exist, they are created by actions and mechanisms within structures. Therefore, if a crisis is to be resolved, the triggers that cause mechanisms to function wrongly have to be identified and removed. The third aspect of this study is that it identifies the cause of the crisis, which is funding, and also suggests that human thinking is declining, giving way to corruption, which has erupted in all sectors of the country. Therefore, the paper concludes that if universities are ever to be free from crisis, and return to the glory days (or even better), then total rebuilding is required. Likewise, if rebuilding happens, universities need to learn from their failure by studying 3 major areas that can help restructure the sector: firstly, where things went wrong; secondly, where things are going wrong; and thirdly where things may continue to go wrong. This paper suggests a need to further study these 3 major issues, as it is assumed that if these areas are carefully highlighted and studied, a profound solution to the problem may be very easy.

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Statement of authorship

The author(s) have a responsibility for the conception and design of the study. The author(s) have approved the final article.

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